

Kostelka, Gallot to chair redraw

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Two northeastern Louisiana legislators will largely determine how the state's new political map will be drawn during a special session that begins Sunday at the Capitol in Baton Rouge.

State Sen. Bob Kostelka, R-Monroe, and State Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, chair the committees that will craft the maps in the Senate and House, but the two lawmakers have opposite plans for drawing Louisiana's congressional districts, the map that has the widest impact.

Louisiana is losing one of its seven congressional seats because of slow population growth, which will leave seven congressmen competing for six seats.



The News-Star file photo State Rep. Rick Gallot, standing, and state Sen. Robert 'Bob' Kostelka, seated, will co-chair a Louisiana legislature committee on redistricting.

Kostelka, chairman of the Senate and Governmental

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Affairs Committee, adamantly supports preserving a congressional district in which Ouachita Parish is the population leader, similar to the current 5th District served by U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander, R-Quitman.

"I expressly requested this committee chairmanship because I knew we had reapportionment coming up, and I wanted to make sure we kept a northeastern Louisiana congressman," said Kostelka, who is serving his second term in the Senate.

Kostelka even flew to Washington to craft a map on which six of the seven congressman agreed upon. But the seventh, U.S. Rep. Jeff Landry, R-New Iberia, opposes that map because it would be difficult for him to win re-election.

"My primary objective is to keep a northeastern Louisiana-based congressman," Kostelka said. "If we had one northern Louisiana district, the interests of Shreveport would be paramount because that's where the voter base would be. I lived here when there was one northern Louisiana congressman, and northeastern Louisiana wasn't a priority."

"We're one of the poorest regions in the country, and we need all the help we can get."

Gallot, who is serving his third and final House term, insists his congressional map proposals were molded through public opinion, which he gleaned through a series of meetings throughout the state.

"People in Monroe might be mad at me, but I felt like it was important for me to go into it with an open mind," he said. "I've been traveling around the state for more than a year, and thing I heard most often was that people in southern Louisiana don't have the same commonalities."

"What regions have more in common — Shreveport and Lake Charles, Monroe and St. Francisville or Monroe and Shreveport?"

But Gallot said his and Kostelka's different approaches won't diminish their ability to work together.

"I have nothing but the highest respect for Sen. Kostelka," Gallot said. "We approached it differently, but that's the way democracy works."

Ultimately, the entire Legislature will vote on the congressional map, and Gov. Bobby Jindal will certainly influence the decision.

But the drawing board begins in the committees controlled by two northeastern Louisiana lawmakers.